

blades of ice

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by [Drhair76](#)

Summary

“Hey!” He says sharply, again causing Tommy to startle, but Eryn’s eyes are on the people. “He doesn’t owe you anything. He doesn’t owe anybody anything.” Then, his expression softens, and he looks over at Tommy. “Not anymore,” he adds softly.

or, Tommy learns to set boundaries after so long being denied.

Notes

:)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Tommy doesn't leave the Olympic village often, mainly because he doesn't leave the practice rink often, but anytime that he goes, he has to have his coach with him. It's precaution, they say- it's just for safety purposes, because he's a minor in a new place, so if he doesn't have his guardian with him, then he doesn't get to leave.

But Tommy already always feels locked at his coach's side. These rules only box him in further, telling him, *you can't move forward without his help, you can't leave without him by your side, you're going nowhere if you don't have him. Be grateful and be respectful and listen. He can leave you behind.*

Alternatively, whenever his coach says that they're going somewhere, Tommy has no choice but to pack up and follow. He follows directions and rules and does what he's told even when it hurts. So when his coach says *get your skates, we're practicing off site today*, Tommy knows he's in for a long, *long* day.

They leave at six in the morning, and they come back at four in the afternoon, and Tommy, personally, lost all ten of those hours. He doesn't remember a thing, but that's normal. His brain is unavailable after hour three on the ice, but that's okay because he isn't paid to think.

He follows directions and rules and does what he's told even when it hurts.

"Smile," his coach says, grabbing Tommy's arm. "There are cameras."

Tommy smiles as he's half dragged back onto the village, through the glass doors to the check in. He can't really feel his legs, or his face for that matter, but he must still be smiling, because the security guard sitting there- Ted, Tommy thinks is his name- stares at them both, horrified.

They're about to brush by when he scrambles to sit up. "Hey!" He says, and Tommy's coach stops short, jerking Tommy with him. "Hey, hey, sorry about that man, can I see your pass?"

Tommy peeks up and sees his coach's eyes sharpen, ever so slightly. He hates being inconvenienced and he hates being interrupted, so Tommy is already praying that this goes quickly so he doesn't get mad.

"Of course," the coach pulls out his pass and flashes it to Ted. "There you go, now if you'll excuse me-" He starts to move, but Ted steps in front of him, looking reluctant and apologetic, but determined.

Ted pulls out a clipboard and presses a button on his walkie-talkie. "Sorry man, we gotta put this one into the system. What time did you leave out? Around ten?"

"Six."

Ted looks up. "In the morning?"

His coach nods. If Tommy isn't completely hallucinating, he would swear that Ted's gaze cuts over to him before falling back onto the clipboard form he's filling out.

"Yeah, see, that's the thing- I'm not on duty until seven, so if you leave before then and come back after lunch, I've got to manually put you into the system and approve you," Ted explains. "It's just extra care to make sure that all passes that leave and come back are authentic."

"People fake passes?" Tommy blurts before he can think better of it. His coach glares down at him for talking out of turn, but Ted softens.

"Sometimes," he admits. "Sometimes people just try to come in and see how far they can get. I've had to tackle one or two rabid luge fans before they hit the living quarters."

Tommy bites down an awed smile.

"So how does this work, then?" His coach huffs. "Because I've got things to do today and-"

"Oh hey!" Ted interrupts, turning and waving at a security guard dressed in dark blue and another, in green. "Connor, Charlie, come here."

They walk over, taking their time. The more seconds tick by, the tenser that his coach's jaw gets. By the time they're actually standing in front of them, Tommy is worried that his teeth are gonna shatter in his mouth from how tight they're being clenched.

"What's going on?" Connor asks, casting his eyes over the two of them like he's *already* tired of them. Tommy shrinks a bit.

"We gotta put this guy in ourselves-" Ted hands over the clipboard. The coach tries to take a glance at it, but Ted doesn't let him see. "You seeing what I'm seeing?"

Connor squints at the paper for a second, his eyes narrow, flicking over to the coach. He seems a lot more than just tired now- pissed, if Tommy were to take a guess. He knows what people look like when they're mad. But, again, his gaze travels to Tommy and the look softens weirdly. He sighs. "Alright, yeah. Come with me, sir, I'm gonna get your pass looked at. Charlie, you're with me, I'm gonna need your help with the machine."

"What about my skater?"

"Oh, athlete passes are always good," Ted smiles. "They've got special icons on the top left so we know who they are. Those can't be replicated because for every player it's different. Most coaches share the same pass across sports, so-" Ted makes a wincing *so sorry about that* face, but it's so cheery and unbothered that it feels completely fake. "Your skater- Tommy, right?- Tommy can stay with me. No need to waste his time dealing with *your* faulty pass."

The coach opens his mouth to respond, but Connor goes, "If we don't do this now, we'll have to wait until after ten because of the shift change."

Tommy doesn't think there's a shift change, because the one thing he knows for certain are patterns, and these three security guards are always here from seven to twelve, but he keeps his mouth shut. It's none of his business if they're just lying. Besides, he's not allowed to talk out of turn. And if that helps him out in this specific case, well, then- maybe it's about time.

"Fine," his coach says, agitated. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

Ted waves happily as he's led away by Connor and Charlie. The second he's out of sight, his smile drops and he turns to Tommy. "Hey kid, sorry about all that. Are you alright?"

Tommy opens his mouth, but his brain, now not hypervigilant and bidden by his coach, must realize that it can let him feel tired, because a wave of exhaustion passes over him so strong that his knees wobble and buckle.

"Woah," Ted reaches out to steady him. "Shit, fuck- uh- hold on, let me-" Ted steps away for a moment to grab a chair, and Tommy collapses into it, sucking in air like he hasn't taken a breath since he woke up. Being at his coach's side all day? That's certainly what it felt like.

"Good god, Tommy, are you okay?" Ted kneels in front of him, tucking the clipboard under his arm. "Can I get you anything? Water? Can I call the trainer for you, or-"

But Tommy isn't concerned with any of that. He's felt tired before and he'll feel it again. That's his life. What he *does* notice is the clipboard.

"Your clipboard," Tommy points out, voice soft. "There's- you've got nothing on it."

Ted looks down like he forgot it was there. "Oh. Well, yeah." He pulls it out and lets Tommy see. "There's no rule about people leaving before seven have to do a manual sign in. There's no machine or people who fake passes- sorry, I kinda lied about that, but I figured you needed a moment to breathe."

On the blank piece of paper that's clipped to the board, in Ted's messy handwriting, is *practiced from six am to four- ten hours straight. take up some of this man's time so the kid can disappear for me.*

"Oh," Tommy says, his throat tight. Connor's look- gentle and empathetic- makes sense now.

"Yeah," Ted nods. "If there's one thing that Connor knows how to do, it's to piss people off. And with Charlie there, who quite frankly has the customer service voice so perfect that it's scary, your coach will be placated just enough to not file a complaint."

"Do you do this a lot?"

Ted grins a bit. "No, actually. You're a special case." Then his smile dies. "Unfortunately, you seem to really *need* it. Is there anything else that you need? Anything I can get you? I'm security, so I can pretty much get into anywhere."

Tommy bows his head slightly. *Wilbur*, he thinks. *Techno. Sleep. A shower. Help.* He tries to speak, but can't.

"Oh, kid," Ted goes, and then suddenly, he's being enveloped by strong arms. Tommy tenses, but the hold is gentle and the warmth is too nice to not lean into. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Then help me, he thinks, wishing he had enough energy to speak, *if you're so sorry, then save me*, but Ted doesn't know and Tommy can't ask, so all Tommy settles for are these few

moments away from his coach tucked inside this protective hold.

What Ted *does* manage to offer is the knowledge that the hockey team is using the rink right now, so once his coach comes back and deems him done for the day, Tommy can make a beeline there, desperate for the comfort and protection that they can provide.

After everything, Tommy realizes that he's going to have to explain it all to his parents.

He didn't go to the trial- because the thought of seeing his coach sitting there arguing that he didn't treat Tommy in the ways that Tommy is learning was bad, *or*, alternatively, arguing that Tommy *deserved* the way he was treated, made him want to curl up tight and hide. But when Phil came back to his room and laid out all that had happened and the conclusion they came to, Tommy pressed his hands to his face and cried.

I've got you, Phil reassured, curling his arms around Tommy and holding tight. *It's alright. Everything is okay now.*

But everything was not okay, because now it was all out. Everything. Tommy is a public enough figure that his trial was not kept quiet, even with him being a minor, so at any point Tommy could go online and see random people's opinions on him and his coach and their relationship anywhere. Just loads of people talking about it like they were there- like they *knew* either one of them. It made Tommy feel ill.

But, nothing made him feel worse than the text he got from his mother just a day after winning gold.

Congratulations on the win, sweetheart! we watched it on the big TV!!

but what's all this they're saying about your coach?? call me when you can <3

Everyone knows, he's suddenly reminded. And no one knows the whole truth. Least of all his parents, who, bless their hearts, are not good at checking up on anything except for when it's on the television. He has no doubt that Puffy and Sam are doing their best to treat his situation with as much respect as it deserves, but even they still have to do their job- and Tommy having no coach is the biggest news in Olympic figure skating since 2012 when they let Mumbo and Grian, two men, pair-skate together for all the world to see.

He should have had a press advisor, but he wasn't permitted one. His coach was supposed to be that for him. Tommy's coach wanted to be everything for him, and now that he's gone, Tommy's realizing just how vulnerable it's made him.

"Tommy?" Phil calls. The celebrations are winding down now, with Schlatt and Sapnap making plans to go get drunk, and with George and Techno having retired to their room in exhaustion from the long day. It's just Tommy, sitting by himself in the common room, staring at his texts, thinking. At least until Phil sits down next to him. "Hey mate, you alright?"

"Yeah," Tommy says. "Just- a lot."

“Long day, huh?”

Tommy rubs his eyes. “Long couple of days.”

Phil hums, then goes quiet. Tommy puts his phone down, turning the screen off. He has no clue how he’s going to explain all of this to his parents- how he’s going to look them in the eyes and tell them that the man they’ve trusted since Tommy was small was actually hurting Tommy the most. He has no idea how to say it, and he has no idea how they’d react.

What if they don’t believe him? What if they try to tell him he’s just being dramatic?

“What’s on your mind, Tommy?” Phil asks, and since everything about him is easy, so is this- just letting all his fears spill out at his feet. His parents, the press, having to search for a new coach. All of it- everything.

“I see,” Phil says, when Tommy’s finished. “And your parents don’t know?”

Not judging, just asking- Tommy can tell. “No, I haven’t- I never told them anything. Even when it was really bad. They just- trusted him. And I was doing so well, so why would I ever complain? I’m-” He takes a shaky breath. “I’m not supposed to be a problem anymore.”

Phil hesitates, then reaches forward, placing his hand over Tommy’s. “Tommy, I highly doubt you ever were. And if that’s how they saw you, then I’ll be the first to say that you wouldn’t have deserved it. With this- Tommy, you telling them the truth about how you were treated and the way that you feel shouldn’t be a problem. If they see it that way, then it’s their fault, not yours, you hear me?”

Tommy nods slowly. He holds Phil’s hand tight- wanting desperately to believe him.

“How about this?” Phil offers after a beat of quiet. “How about- since I’m the closest thing you have to a guardian out here- that I go with you when you tell them. I can help fill in some of the blanks, especially since I was at the trial. How would that make you feel?”

Tommy wants to heave a sigh of the largest relief he’s ever felt.

He’s only known Phil for a couple of weeks now, but having him at his side while he faces his parents and faces this thing that has plagued him for all his life would make him feel infinitely better about all of it.

“Would you?” He asks, and Phil immediately nods.

“Of course Tommy, whatever you need.”

And Phil sticks to his promise- he takes two weeks off to come travel home with Tommy. He walks up to Tommy’s parents’ doorstep with Tommy just a bit behind him. He rings the doorbell and proudly introduces himself when Tommy’s father asks who he is. When it comes time for Tommy to explain, Phil slides a careful hand over Tommy’s, and doesn’t make any remarks about the way that Tommy’s voice wavers.

And then, when his mother starts to cry and his father looks devastated, and Tommy pulls away to hug them, he peeks from in between them to where Phil is sitting and watching, a sad, but proud look in his eyes.

After Tommy wins gold, his popularity skyrockets.

He's not a vain person, nor is he a particularly confident person- which Schlatt promises him they'll be working on- but even he can tell that there's an increase in the amount of attention that he gets as he goes to Europe Worlds.

When he gets out of the car, coat pulled tight around him, he's met with cheers and calls of his name, so loud that it makes him stop. Eret gets out next, brushing down the front of his coat and stopping beside Tommy, also stunned by the turnout.

"They're just...waiting outside," Tommy says, blinking, and Eret huffs a soft laugh, shaking off his surprise.

"You're a big deal, Tommy." He pauses, then goes, "you can stick close to my side if you're unsettled."

Tommy does. He sticks close and smiles at them as they walk to the door, but he doesn't drift over to them, even as they wave things at him that they want him to take. He gets down the path and to the door, and a cry of his name catches his attention, making him stop. Eret pauses with him, following his gaze to a little girl on the shoulders of a father who is holding out a *Snoopy* plush.

He hesitates, and Eret, quietly, goes, "you can take it if you want."

Tommy takes a breath, then steps over, watching the way the girl's eyes brighten, and the way the father melts in relief.

"Hi," he says gently, and the girl hides her face in her father's hair. "I'm Tommy. Do you have something for me?"

Shyly, she holds it out, peeking at him through her own fingers. Tommy takes it, and delights in the way she squeals when their fingers brush.

"Thank you so much," he coos. "I love Snoopy. I really appreciate it."

She ducks back into her father's hair, cheeks red, and the dad just laughs good-naturedly, shaking her a little. "Thank you," he whispers, "she's been talking about you ever since your last skate. She's made me go and buy her ice skates."

Tommy feels breathless. He remembers watching Vikk- standing on the carpet in front of the television and hopping around barefoot, trying to do what he did, imagining that he had skates that matched. The thought that he could be that for another little kid somewhere... that's entirely overwhelming to hear.

"I-I can't wait to see her on the ice," Tommy responds, shaken. "I'm sure she'll be out-skating me in no time." Then he nods his thanks and goes back to his coach's side, hugging the plush to his chest.

"How was it?" Eret asks, a knowing smile on his face.

"Amazing." Tommy squeezes Snoopy tighter. If every interaction he has with his fanbase is this, then he thinks he wouldn't mind taking the time to meet with them.

...

"There are mad people in there, man," Erynn says, looking through the glass doors of the airport.

Tommy, with his snoopy plush under his arm, his suitcase at his side and a silver medal around his neck, peers over his friend's shoulder. Erynn is right- there *are* a lot of people in there. They're all kind of just standing there, waiting, and not with bags either- with phones out and ready, as if at some kind of concert.

"What's wrong?" Boomer, who Tommy is traveling home with while Eret visits family, hops over, pulling at his backpack straps and whistles comically long. "Oh boy. That's a crowd. Do you think all these people are tryna get through security, or-"

"I think they're here for Tom."

Tommy flushes. "I didn't- I got second, I didn't even-"

Erynn rolls his eyes. "*Just* second? As if you lost because you didn't get first. Besides, all these people would still adore you if you got seventeenth. They don't just like you because you win." Then, for good measure, Erynn flicks Tommy's forehead and Tommy whines a little.

"You suck," he lies, rubbing his face, trying to control the smile wanting to bubble up. "But yeah, I guess so."

"Do you think we can get through all these people without losing a limb?" Boomer asks, rolling up his sleeves like he's about to go to war.

"No." Erynn answers. Then he pushes the doors open.

Well. It could be worse, Tommy thinks, pulling his rolling suitcase behind him. As soon as they walk in and are within sight, the crowd starts cheering like Tommy's some sort of celebrity. He waves, because that's what he remembers seeing Eret do back when he skated and had fans like this. Eret was calm and confident, but warm. He always had a smile to give to anyone waiting.

There are people taking pictures of them and calling his name and waving at him, but there are also some that are waving things at him- flowers, bags, pluses that are exactly the same as the ones tucked under his arm. He doesn't drift over to grab them, mainly because he has nowhere for any of those to go when he gets on the plane. Most of them seem to understand,

while others don't mind that Tommy won't pick them up and just throw them near him as he walks by.

It's just like being on the ice, he surmises. They just want to show their appreciation.

They're almost at the end of the line of people and into security, when one of them shouts his name rather loudly. Tommy flinches, and turns to look at where the sound, almost like a reprimand, came from. He's half expecting to see his coach, weirdly, but of course he isn't there and it's just young people who like his skating.

Although, the voice comes again, loud and aggressive, "Don't you have time for your fans? We've come all this way and you're just gonna *ignore* us?"

Tommy stops, and another plush lands right at his feet.

Does he have the right to just ignore them? What kind of person walks by praise without acknowledging it?

Before, he didn't have bunches of fans following him, or wanting his autograph. The only place that he ever came face to face with the people who liked his skating was when he was on the ice. His coach never tolerated crowds- the only attention that he ever wanted on Tommy was either his own or cameras.

Tommy doesn't know how to do this.

Thankfully, Eryn notices him stopping, and hangs back, eyes flitting from Tommy's face to the crowd where the voice resides.

"Hey!" He says sharply, again causing Tommy to startle, but Eryn's eyes are on the people. "He doesn't owe you anything. He doesn't owe anybody anything." Then, his expression softens, and he looks over at Tommy. "Not anymore," he adds softly.

Then Eryn reaches over and takes Tommy's hand to pull him away, leaving the plush there, discarded on the ground.

Interviews never get any easier.

Every day that goes by, Tommy feels more and more like he was not made for the eye of the media. Not only did he not have any training for it, but his coach never wanted him speaking much anyway. And now, with his spike in attention, the cameras are becoming invasive, following, tracking him, searching him out. They don't wait for Tommy to have Eret by his side, they don't care that Tommy is startled and they certainly don't care if their questions are uncomfortable.

Hence:

"What do you think, if your coach were here, he'd say about that performance you just gave?"

Tommy frowns, not understanding. "My coach is here. Eret was just –"

"No," they say, cutting him off. "The coach that you left."

Tommy's throat goes dry.

The coach that you left.

Tommy, at first, doesn't know what to think. His mind goes completely blank – one hundred percent clear – for just a milli-second, before a ton of thoughts filter in all at once. *It's true*, he thinks, but then, *it isn't*, and then, *but everyone knows*, but then, *no, he hurt me – he hurt me, and leaving someone who hurts you is never wrong*, and then, *but how selfish are you to think that you deserve something right?*

The interviewer is still looking at him, expectant, waiting for an answer. The *world* is waiting for an answer.

This is what his coach warned him off. *All this time I put into you? All the golds that I help you produce? Everyone knows you're of me. They'll all see you for the selfish child that you are if you don't stay.*

Without me, he said, they won't like you. Not really.

Well, Tommy met the fans that didn't know how selfish he was. Then he met the ones who were figuring it out. And now here he was, on the judgment block of the world, ready to be chopped.

"Tommy?" A voice calls. It startles Tommy out of his own head, because it doesn't come from the interviewer, and it doesn't come from the cameras.

In fact, Rae is there, poking her head around a barrier, her eyes wide and excited and her entire expression screaming *I shouldn't be here*. Behind her, looking much less suspicious, is Minx, chewing gum and glancing from side to side.

"Hey!" Rae waves. "Hey, we found you!"

Tommy isn't prepared for the way she hops over the barrier like it was nothing. Like she was just... allowed to do that. Minx rolls her eyes and follows, much less dramatic about it.

She comes over so fast that she bumps into Tommy's side, but it's alright, because she steadies him afterward. All the hockey players do that – by now, Tommy's used to it. They all have more body than they know what to do with, and more excitement than anyone that Tommy's ever known. Besides, he won't admit it, but the little bumps and tiny nudges remind him that he's a person. He's here and alive and they're with him and they're not going anywhere anytime soon.

As Rae steadies him, she peers into the camera, curious. "Oh, fu– Tommy, are you doing an interview?"

The interviewer glares. "Yes," they say. "*He was*. So if you'll just *excuse us* –"

Minx steps over on Tommy's other side. She pops her gum. "No." The interviewer splutters, and she raises an eyebrow. "Anything you have to ask, you can ask him while we're here."

Tommy almost smiles – that is, until the person looks at him, and he can only see the expectant, challenging gaze of his coach. He stops, shrinks, and almost opens his mouth to tell Rae and Minx to leave, but then Rae nudges him again and reaches down to clasp his hand.

It's small, but it helps.

"They can stay," he says. "What was your question?"

Minx, somehow, pops her gum threateningly.

"Uh – " they stumble a little. "Just – your performance. How would you rank it among the others that you've given during this competition?"

Still not a great question, but much better than the *other* one. Tommy, with Minx on one side and Rae on the other, can finally relax enough to give a straight answer.

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Afterwards, Rae bounces out of the arena ahead of them, carrying Tommy's bag on her back and texting Tina that they successfully stole Tommy away.

Minx walks at his side in a companionable quiet for a little until she breaks it. "What did he ask you?"

"What?" Tommy asks.

"What was the question?" She asks again, no less patient. When Tommy doesn't answer, Minx sighs. "Kid, I'm an Olympic female hockey player. If you don't think I know the face a person makes when they're asked an uncomfortable question, then you don't know me at all." Then again, gentle, "What was the question?"

Tommy frowns to himself. "It was about my coach."

"Eret?"

"No," he says. Minx's expression darkens.

"Ah." She's quiet for a moment. "Things like that don't deserve your time, you know. Questions like that, people that believe whatever they want to believe about something *you've* lived through."

"What if I don't know what I lived through?" Tommy asks. "What if I'm still unsure?"

"That's fine, Tommy. Be unsure. But don't just let other people put words in your mouth about it. Don't let other people make a decision about what you're thinking." She says. "If you

don't know something and they're making assumptions, then you shut them down. You put up your boundaries, and don't let people talk over you."

"You make it sound simple."

Minx laughs a little. "I do, don't I? Well, I'll tell you the truth: it never gets easier. I don't want you getting any false hope here."

"Oh." Tommy pouts a bit. "Well, thanks."

"But," she adds, "it also never stops being helpful. You'll see," her eyes sparkle a bit, "once you put that first foot down, and you can *feel* how much steadier you are, it'll take nothing to do it again and again."

"There are good fans," Eret says once, when they're having dinner together in his home, out in the porch, watching the fireflies blink in and out of existence. "And there are bad fans."

"How do you know which one is which?"

"That's the thing – you don't know until they make you feel *wrong*," he says. "In your stomach. Everything sort of bunches up because of them or something they say. It's a feeling that lingers, and to be honest, it never stops coming up, no matter where you go."

Tommy's shoulders dip a little, disappointed. But Eret isn't finished.

"But," he continues, "we, as humans, are naturally inclined to want to stop actions that hurt us. After the first wrong, you'll learn what you can handle and what you can't, and then from there you'll be able to stop the hurt before it starts."

"On my own?" Tommy frowns.

"All on your own." Eret nods.

"No, no –" Schlatt is saying, walking backwards in front of them with absolutely *zero* care to whether or not he's about to crash into something. "What I'm *saying* is that you can't say both bookstores *and* libraries are useful. It just doesn't make sense."

"Do you hear yourself?" George asks, raising an eyebrow. "Genuine question. I'm curious as to whether you *use* your ears when you use your mouth."

Schlatt makes a mocking expression. Techno jolts like he's about to reach out. "Schlatt, turn around, you almost knocked over a pregnant woman."

Schlatt doesn't turn around.

"Why would bookstores not be useful?" Wilbur frowns. "I love book stores."

"You like *bookmarks*," Schlatt corrects, expertly side-stepping a man with arms full of designer clothing bags. "That isn't the same thing."

Wilbur frowns, considering. Then he hums. "I *do* like bookmarks."

Tommy, even after all these months, finds it fascinating how this team can talk about *anything*. Personally, he could sit and listen to them ramble on for hours and hours – and *has*, falling asleep to their mini debates and discussions like they're his own personal white noise machine. Still, even now, they astound him with their existence.

"We need to find Quackity," Techno says. "He's going to come back with half a store, can we focus up?"

"No," Schlatt says, sticking out his tongue, and then, as karma, he almost tumbles backwards over two teenage girls with matching *zara* bags. "Fuck – shit –"

Techno doesn't even bother trying to help him up. Wilbur stifles a laugh and Schlatt goes bright red, sitting there on his ass.

"Oh my god," one of the girls says. "Oh my God, are you alright?"

"Maybe if he was looking where he was going," the other girl says, eyes narrowed. Schlatt gapes, but Techno hides a grin.

"She's right, isn't she? Sorry about that," he says to the girls. "It's my job to apologize for him. And to make sure he doesn't kill people when I can stop him."

"Oh it's fine," the first girl goes, waving a hand quickly, all bubbly and embarrassed herself. "No, we could've moved we just –"

She stops.

Tommy, a bit preoccupied with watching Schlatt turn steadily more red, and used to fading into a comfortable background when surrounded by them, doesn't expect it when he looks over and sees the girl looking at him.

"Oh my God. Oh my *god!*" She squeals. "You're Tom Simons! You're Tom Simons, the figure skater!"

Tommy immediately smiles – strained and a hint unnatural, but he's got only a couple of months of practice with all his new fame. "Hi," he says. "It's nice to meet you."

"Wait," the other girl says, her tone...unreadable. "Wait, *you're* Tom Simons?"

"Yes," he nods. "Did you want a photo?"

The first girl nods frantically, eyes like stars, but the second, weirdly, makes a face. "No," she goes. "Jas might. But – no, not me."

"Oh, okay," he keeps up his smile. Schlatt picks himself up off the floor and Jas bounces over to his side, handing her phone to her friend. Tommy smiles for the photo, and just as the camera clicks, Jas is bouncing on her toes.

"Thank you!" She cheers. This time, Tommy's smile is real.

"No problem," he says easily. He's always willing to spend a little time with people who love ice skating. Especially if they're this excited – it's sweet. "Anything for a figure skating fan."

Then, the other girl speaks up.

"Anything for a figure skating fan?" She asks, skeptical. Next to him, Wilbur shifts a little, similarly startled by the aggressive tone. "Then why did you leave your coach?"

Tommy's genuinely stunned. "Um – I – Sorry?"

"Your coach." She says again. "The one that *got* you a gold medal. The one that helped you win so much. Everyone is *so* proud of you and they believe in you so much – my little sister *loves* you. My little brother too. Why would you fucking give that up? The second you make it you decide to leave behind the people who've stuck by you for *years*. I watched your *first* junior worlds. He was there. How *dare* you?"

Schlatt steps forward, done being embarrassed, probably ready to run over this girl for real, but Tommy reaches out and catches his arm.

"No," he says, eyes intent. "No. Let me." He steps forward slightly. The girl's glare doesn't lessen. "I didn't leave my coach."

"Oh really?" Her eyebrow quirks. Jas tugs at her arm, embarrassed now. "So then what – he left you?"

Tommy inhales. "Yeah. He did." He can feel Wilbur's eyes on him. Schlatt. Techno. George. He fights the urge to drop his gaze. "He left me years ago. The day he made me twirl so much that I regretted eating. The day he started giving me panic attacks before putting my skates on. The day that he was told there was a limit to how long I could practice and he booked a *different* rink so he didn't have to listen. The very first day he hurt me, he left me. He broke a silent promise. He doesn't get to break me too. Not for you. Not for anyone."

She looks stunned. Jas looks like she's about to cry. Tommy, personally, feels like his pulse is about to fall out of his throat. He steps back, gives Jas a thin smile, and then starts to walk away.

He manages to turn the corner before his own knees buckle and he's gasping, falling. Arms catch him easily, curling around him, softening his fall.

"Tommy," Wilbur whispers – he sounds in tears. When Tommy looks at him, he realizes he's right. He *is* crying. But smiling too. "Sunshine, you – you're *magnificent*."

"I'm on the floor," Tommy says, breathless.

"So am I," Wilbur's teary. "We're on the floor. Doesn't change the fact that you're magnificent. And that I am so, so proud of you."

Tommy feels like crying. He drops his head so his forehead is on Wilbur's shoulder. "Minx says it never gets easier."

"Minx, huh? Well, she's always been smart. She's right," Wilbur hums. A hand rubs at his back, soothing. "It doesn't. You'll always feel like this. But – what else do you feel? What else do you feel?"

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut and tries to shift through the feelings clogging up his heart. *Anxiety, fear, that feeling like his heart is racing past what it's meant to – but also, a release.* He gasps, shoulders heaving.

"Good," he breathes, "I feel – I feel good."

More tears well up in Wilbur's eyes. His proud smile only grows. "Yeah. See? And *that* will only grow, Tommy. Trust me. I felt it. And I can't wait to see you feel it too."

Tommy sniffls, then smiles through his tears. He can't wait to see it either.

End Notes

songs I listened to while writing this:

this is me trying - Taylor Swift

1 step forward, three steps back - Olivia Rodrigo

Remedy - Adele

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